



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

27/17

# PRESIDENT XI'S US VISIT UPSTAGED BY A RENEWED AMERICAN WILSONIANISM

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Many of the newspapers in Israel last week headlined on the US missile attack on Syria, done in retaliation to evidence that pointed towards the presence of chemical weapons on Syrian soil and its attack on its civilian population. One of the headlines in The Jerusalem Post on April 7, 2017, read *'Trump Strikes on Syria makes it clear: The Americans are Back'*.<sup>1</sup> Israeli leaders have issued a strong message of support for America's missile strike, including its Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Prior to the US launch of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles from its warships in the Mediterranean – which some reports suggest caused heavy damage to the Shayrat airbase in Syria – US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, while strongly condemning Russia and the Syrian government over the use of Chemical weapons attacks on civilians also stated that, *'...when the UN consistently fails in its duty to act collectively, there are times in the life of states that we are compelled to take our own action....'*<sup>2</sup> Further, on April 7, 2017, Amb Haley, threatened that the US

would take further military actions in Syria following its missile strikes if found necessary.<sup>3</sup>

It has been less than hundred days since President Trump took office and we are already witnessing a substantial escalation by the US in the Syrian conflict, signalling the return of American power in West Asia; six years after the start of the Syrian civil war and the first incident for suspected chemical attack by the State on its citizens in 2013. This recent military engagement undertaken by the US, displays a shift in the Trump administration policy of non-interventionist and opens the door to a more traditional American engagement in the world; while at the same time sending a clear message to Tehran, Pyongyang and elsewhere that any kind of proliferation of deadly weapons would not be tolerated. This is a huge move from the Jacksonian brand of populism that got Trump elected to the White House in November last year. According to Prof Walter Russell Mead, President Trump's win was of the merit that

during his entire election campaign he rode on the sentiments of nationalist, egalitarian, and individualistic, which comprises and remains one of the most powerful forces in American politics and are collectively known as the 'Jackson's brand of populism'.<sup>4</sup> The departure of President Trump from the ideologue of Jacksonism has also caused some amount of discontent amongst his core supporters that sought a new America that is more isolationist and adopts a non-interventionist approach in terms of its foreign policy, focussing on building America domestically first. This shift marks Washington's renewed commitment to the Wilsonian school of American foreign policy which is based on US President Woodrow Wilson's famous fourteen points that he believed would help create world peace if implemented. This Wilsonianism ideologue expects America to spread democracy, capitalism, and opposes any kind of isolationist tendencies, favouring American interventionism towards ensuring the establishment of the so-called American values globally.

The emergence of this traditional American global engagement could not have come at a worse time for President Xi Jinping's maiden bilateral meeting with President Trump. Firstly, the entire summit was upstaged by the US missile attack on the Syrian air base. Secondly, and more pertinent, is the re-emergence of US global involvement at a time when it was expected that under the new Trump administration, US would become more

isolationist in its foreign policy, including its foreign trade and commerce. The revision which has taken place would have a consequential impact on the growing Chinese assertiveness, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. China hoped that the perceived US withdrawal – such as its pulling out from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) under the new US administration – would provide China with more manoeuvrability at least in the South-East Asian region. This would provide Beijing the space to carry out the implementation of its Belt Road Initiative while at the same time increase its assertiveness over the South China Sea. This renewed US commitment to the Wilsonian approach would renew US commitment to its allies in the Western Pacific; with President Trump ordering the USS Carl Vinson carrier strike group towards the Korean peninsula to provide a range of options for eliminating the North Korean nuclear threat.<sup>5</sup> US officials have warned that the era of strategic patience is over with President Trump telling Beijing that *'if China is not going to solve North Korea, we will'*.<sup>6</sup>

However, it would also be wrong to say that the US-China Summit held at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, did not have any positive outcomes. Diao Daming, a Research Fellow, at the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, writes that the meeting did not deal with any specific issues, but as President Xi stated that *'we have a thousand reasons to get the China-US relations right, and not one reason to*

spoil it', indicating room for consensus.<sup>7</sup> President Xi stressed on cooperation in terms of diplomacy, economy, law enforcement and cyber security, and cultural and people to people exchange, as the only correct choice for both countries to become good partners and thus manage differences and solve sensitive issues in a constructive way. Further, the bilateral summit also brought out a hundred day plan for trade talks aimed at boosting US exports and reducing China's trade surplus with the US.<sup>8</sup> However, the current US engagement in West Asia, along with its concern of a possible nuclear proliferation in North Korea, has renewed Washington's commitment to Wilsonianism. This has called upon Washington to review its current posturing in the Global order along with reassessing its commitments with its allies in the Western Pacific. This is a movement away from the brief period of the right-wing ideologues of isolationism and non-interventionism to a more proactive global stance in the name of 'American Exceptionalism'.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anna Ahronheim, "Trump Strike on Syria makes it Clear: The Americans are Back", *The Jerusalem Post*, April 7, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Commander-in-Chief-Trump-makes-it-clear-The-Americans-are-back-486437>, accessed on April 10, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Roth, "Haley Threatens 'our own action' in Syria if UN doesn't act", *CNN Politics*, April 5, 2017,

<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/05/politics/un-security-council-resolution-syria/>, accessed on April 7, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "Nikki Haley: US Prepared to do more in Syria, but hopes it won't be necessary", *The Times of Israel*, April 7, 2017, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/nikki-haley-us-prepared-to-do-more-in-syria-but-hopes-it-wont-be-necessary/>, accessed on April 10, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Russell Mead, "Donald Trump's Jacksonian Revolt", *Hudson Institute*, November 13, 2016, <https://hudson.org/research/13010-donald-trump-s-jacksonian-revolt>, accessed on April 10, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan Brownes, "US Aircraft Carrier-led Strike Group headed toward Korean Peninsula", *CNN*, April 9, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/08/politics/navy-korean-peninsula/>, accessed on April 10, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Nicole Gaouetta, "Trump, China Leader face North Korea dilemma" April 7, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/06/politics/trump-xi-north-korea/>, accessed on April 10, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> "Xi-Trump meeting boosts dynamism in China-US ties", *Global Times*, April 8, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1041417.shtml>, accessed on April 10, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Cao Siqi and Yang Sheng, "Xi Stresses benefits of Sino-US Relations", *Global Times*, April 8, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1041346.shtml>, accessed on April 10, 2017.